



# Record Traffic From The Past

8-9 March 1862



by  
Steve Anderson

Out of the mouth of the Elizabeth River on 8 March 1862 emerged a dark, ponderous hulk. Like a giant crocodile, it plowed into the waters of Hampton Roads, its snout gliding barely above the surface and its back an armored hump that cruised menacingly toward its prey.

A U.S. naval officer aboard the Federal warship, *Congress*, shouted, "That Thing is coming down!" That "Thing" belched fire and smoke and flew the Stars and Bars, the flag of the Confederacy. It was the *Virginia*, an ironclad scabest of war that had been constructed on the hull of a former Union fighting ship, *Merrimac*.

The *Virginia* appeared indestructible as it burned the *Congress*, sank the *Cumberland*, and proceeded, virtually unmarked, through Hampton Roads, chasing another Union warship, *Minnesota*, aground.

Observing from his shoreline post at Newport News, amid stray cannon shot that wrecked his wooden shack and shattered the walls around him, a Union telegrapher named George Cowan relayed a "blow-by-blow" description of the fighting. His



message flashed through Fort Monroe to Washington.

Cowan's detailed and immediate account aroused a near-panic in the War Department in Washington. Even Lincoln repeatedly strayed to the White House windows to see if the invincible Rebel warship was approaching the Capitol up the Potomac.

The panic was quelled the next day, when the odd-shaped Union ironclad, *Monitor*, engaged the *Virginia* and eventually forced the "Thing" back into its lair.

During the battle, a Confederate army signalman aboard the *Virginia* used signal flags and torches to relay messages to a shore-based signal center. This was the first use of an Army signalman aboard a Navy warship, and it heralded the subsequent assignment of signal officers aboard Union and Confederate warships and blockade runners throughout the Civil War.

